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ABSTRACT

Alternative teacher certification is defined as any significant departure from the traditional undergraduate route through teacher education programs in universities and colleges. An overview is presented of some specific alternative certification programs, and raises questions useful for evaluating alternative certification programs. A bibliography of references is included. (JD)

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Alternative Certification for Teachers

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Alternative Certification for Teachers

Teacher shortages and public discussion about the quality of teacher education have been a catalyst for the implementation in several states of alternative routes to certification for teachers. Alternative certification is defined by specific state programs. While it is too early to know the results of such programs, evaluation questions can be framed.

What Is Alternative Certification For Teachers?

Teacher certification, in general, is a process designed to ensure that individuals who enter teaching meet minimum standards for competence (Koff, Florio, and Cronin, 1976). These minimum standards for initial entry are set by each state; the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification produces a manual containing these certification requirements (1984). Typically, these state requirements include specific numbers of undergraduate credit hours from institutions of higher education in subject matter (such as math and English), in professional studies (such as child development and teaching methods), and in student teaching. Universities and colleges "certify" that their graduates have met these minimum credit hour standards as part of the state teacher licensure process. In some states, certificates are issued at graduation; in others, certificates are issues after a probationary teaching period.

Alternative teacher certification may be defined, then, as any significant departure from this traditional undergraduate route through teacher education programs in universities and colleges (Oliver and McKibbin, 1985). These definitions vary, however, according to the particular state's definition. One view says that: "An alternative model is designed for a different population from the usual 18-24 year old undergraduate population...The fundamental differences [from traditional certification] are in the target audience, the training design, and the length of training, not in program content, rigor or expected outcomes." (Smith et al., 1985, p. 24). Another view states that the primary objective of these alternate routes is to increase the number of qualified secondary teachers by training and certifying arts and sciences graduates, particularly in shortage areas such as math and science (Dottin, 1985).

Alternative teacher certification can be distinguished from certification processes which ignore training in professional studies, such as "emergency" certification, which carries the expectation that the teacher will obtain the necessary credentials or be replaced eventually by a regularly certified person. In any discussion of alternative certification for teachers, then, it is important to define precisely what is meant by the term.

What Are Some Specific Alternative Certification Programs?

California's Hughes-Hart Educational Reform Act established the Teacher Trainee Certificate Program, which allows local school districts to prepare teacher trainees over a 2-3 year period, and also allows the state to issue a teaching credential to the trainees just as it has to those recommended from traditional programs. The program is designed for teacher trainees in grades 9 to 12 or 6 to 8 in junior high schools departmentalized by subject. Requirements to enter the teacher trainee certificate program include (a) a baccalaureate degree in the subject to be taught, (b) a passing score on the California Basic Educational Skills Test, and (c) a passing score on state-approved subject matter examination. Requirements for the school district to establish a teacher trainee program include (a) verification that fully credentialed teachers are not available, (b) implementation of a professional development plan for teacher trainees, including an annual evaluation, description of courses to be taken, and plans for any preservice activities including student teaching, (c) consultation with an institution of higher education that has a state-approved program of professional preparation, and (d) mentor teachers who are employed by the school district and who have certificates. (For a more detailed description of these requirements, see Oliver and McKibbin, 1985.)

In New Jersey, the State Education Agency has implemented an alternative system that requires (a) a baccalaureate degree, (b) 30 credits in the field to be taught or five years' experience, (c) a passing score on a subject examination, (d) an offer for employment in a school district, and (f) 200 clock-hours in training at regional teacher centers; these centers are operated through contracts with local schools and colleges of education. In Delaware, individuals with bachelor's degrees in subjects designated as critical shortage areas may take 1 to 3 years to complete a state-approved program to receive a standard certificate; most programs are cooperatively run by the three Delaware institutions of higher education that prepare teachers. Project "Partner" in Arizona has 8 to 10 school districts cooperating with 15 high tech industries to implement a 15-month program for individuals with bachelor's degrees in mathematics, science, or foreign language. These and other state alternative routes are described in a 50-state survey of teacher education policies (AACTE, 1985).

Components of alternative programs recommended by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education include (a) admission standards including a baccalaureate degree and assessment of subject matter competency, personal characteristics, and communications skills, (b) a curriculum that provides knowledge and skills essential to the beginning teacher, (c) a supervised internship, and (d) an examination which evaluates competency in the subject field and in professional studies (Smith et al., 1985).

What Are The Results Of Alternative Certification Programs?

While it is too early to understand fully the results of these programs, questions for evaluation can be framed. An important question concerns the teaching effectiveness of those who enter teaching through alternative routes. The existing state requirements for certification to teach "never have been examined for their relationship to teacher effectiveness" (Hawk, Coble, and Swanson, 1985, p. 13), so that little basis exists for comparisons between traditional and alternative routes. Research from two related fields of study – vocational education and teacher education program effectiveness – may help to frame questions to evaluate the results of these programs.

Vocational education research has been inconclusive about the effectiveness of teachers without traditional teacher education

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degrees, possibly because of the wide range of experience and training of those with provisional certificates (Erekson and Barr, 1985); this suggests that evaluation of alternate routes should include assessments of the background and previous experience of the teachers involved, since these factors may explain differences in outcomes. Also, since evidence exists that professional studies do have an impact on the quality of education (Evertson, Hawley, and Zlotnik, 1985), the nature of professional studies in the alternative certification route should be described so that variation in program effectiveness may be explained by program differences. In other words, the individual teacher's previous training and experience and the specific alternate certification training program the teacher completes will greatly affect the program's results.

Other outcomes to be considered in any assessment include the increased financial costs of alternative certification to the states and localities (Davis, 1981), the question of the individual's ability . . . to develop individualized instruction for special needs students (Erekson and Barr, 1985), and the issue of "harm to students. Certification should ensure that a person is 'safe to practice' through demonstration of appropriate knowledge, pedagogical competencies, and professional values *before* one is permitted to practice" (Williamson et al., 1985, p. 21). In regard to the latter, for example, the New Jersey State Commission report says, "Before taking the state subject test and being offered employment, the provisional teaching candidate will be screened through a local interview process which must be thorough and focus on the evaluation of academic and experiential background and, in particular, on those personal/ethical qualities identified in the Boyer Report (p. 8-9) as critical to the profession of teaching" (p. 4). Finally, assessment should consider whether alternative certification actually increases the number of new teachers and how long those who are certified by this route remain in teaching.

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Many of the following references – those identified with an EJ or ED number – have been abstracted and are in the ERIC data base. The journal articles should be available at most research libraries. The documents (citations with an ERIC ED number) are available on microfiche in ERIC microfiche collections at over 700 locations. Documents can also be ordered through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service. Call (800) 227-3742 for price and order information. For a list of ERIC collections in your area, or for information on submitting documents to ERIC, contact the ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 610, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 293-2450.

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